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Implications of the Military Balance of Power in Lebanon

**Special National Intelligence Estimate
Memorandum to Holders**

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*SNIE 11/35/36-83
17 January 1984*

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MEMORANDUM TO HOLDERS OF SNIE 11/35/36-83

IMPLICATIONS OF THE MILITARY BALANCE OF POWER IN LEBANON

Information available as of 17 January 1984 was
used in the preparation of this Memorandum.

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THIS ESTIMATE IS ISSUED BY THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE.

THE NATIONAL FOREIGN INTELLIGENCE BOARD CONCURS.

The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of the Memorandum:

The Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, and the intelligence organization of the Department of State.

Also Participating:

The Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army

The Director of Naval Intelligence, Department of the Navy

The Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Department of the Air Force

The Director of Intelligence, Headquarters, Marine Corps

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KEY JUDGMENTS

In SNIE 11/35/36-83 of 23 December 1983, the Intelligence Community addressed the implications of the military balance of power in Lebanon, particularly the effect of increased US military activity there on Syrian goals and tactics and Lebanese domestic politics. We believe that the basic judgments contained in that SNIE remain valid.

Since the completion of the Estimate, there have been some new developments which this Memorandum will address:

- Lebanese confessional factions, the Syrians, and the Israelis have agreed in principle to a security plan that would allow the central government to expand its area of control.
- The Lebanese Army extended its authority to the Sabra-Shatilla camp area in late December.

At least portions of the security plan probably will go into effect, although full implementation of the plan remains uncertain. We believe Syria supports eventual implementation of the plan, primarily because Damascus believes implementation will lead to withdrawal of the Multinational Force (MNF). Full implementation of the plan would provide a substantial, but probably short-term, boost to the Gemayel government by extending its authority. Gemayel's domestic standing would undoubtedly benefit, and implementation of the plan could provide him with additional time to work on political deals with the Shias and the Druze. Implementation would also improve the political climate for discussion of national reconciliation issues.

If the plan is put into effect, the security situation for the MNF could improve because artillery and mortar fire would probably be reduced, but the threat of terrorist actions against MNF members will remain even if the plan is fully implemented.

Conditional acceptance of the limited disengagement accord should not by itself be interpreted as a clear signal that the key confessional groups are prepared to reach a broader political accommodation on the government's terms or cut separate deals, however. Each of the key groups—including the Syrians—believes the proposed plan serves its current needs without compromising its basic security and political interests.

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If the security plan is not fully implemented—or if it is partially implemented and quickly breaks down—there will not automatically be a return to widespread factional fighting. The Druze, the Shias, and the Christian Lebanese Forces militia all lack any enthusiasm for a return to protracted fighting and are more interested in maintaining their positions. Failure to implement the plan or a breakdown, however, might lead the Gemayel government to attempt to expand its authority by force.

The Gemayel government's ability to expand its authority militarily—even in the absence of a political agreement—has steadily improved in recent months. The Army is capable of conducting limited operations in certain areas without encountering serious confessional strains. The Army's improved capability and December's successful sweep operation in the Sabra-Shatilla camp, however, do not guarantee that the Army will be successful in a similar operation against Beirut's Shia-dominated southern suburbs.

Implementation of the security accords could pave the way for substantial progress on national reconciliation, provided Gemayel makes a genuine effort to deal with his Lebanese rivals and can come to some agreement with Syria on the 17 May accord. We believe Intelligence Community judgments in the December Estimate that Gemayel is unable to make such efforts remain valid. The longer Gemayel temporizes on real political reforms, the more vulnerable the plan will become to local security incidents and the mistrust and suspicion among various militias.

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DISCUSSION

1. In SNIE 11/35/36-83 of 23 December 1983, the Intelligence Community addressed the implications of changes in the military balance of power in Lebanon, particularly the effect of increased US military activity there on Syrian goals and tactics and Lebanese domestic politics.

2. Since the completion of the Estimate, there have been some new developments which this Memorandum will address:

- Lebanese confessional factions, the Syrians and the Israelis have agreed in principle to a security plan that would allow the central government to expand its area of control.
- The Lebanese Army extended its authority to the Sabra-Shatilla camp area in late December.

The Security Plan

3. Major Lebanese confessional groups have accepted in principle the proposed security plan as the only way of inducing the government to enter serious negotiations on broader political issues. But conditional acceptance of a limited disengagement accord should not by itself be interpreted as a clear signal that they are prepared to reach a broader political accommodation on the government's terms or to cut individual deals. Each of the key groups believes that the proposed security plan serves its current needs without compromising its basic security and political interests. Progress toward longer term accommodation will depend on the Gemayel government's readiness to reach agreement with its Lebanese rivals and Syria on power sharing and the 17 May accord.

4. The Lebanese Government sees the plan as a way to defuse increasing pressure from MNF contributors to demonstrate progress and to forestall a precipitous withdrawal of the MNF. Shia leader Nabih Barri hopes that implementation of the accord will undercut his growing opposition—chiefly pro-Iranian Muslim fundamentalists and leftists alike—who seek to undermine his authority and control. Barri believes that an

extension of Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Internal Security Forces (ISF) units in key areas would help curtail radical activities in the southern suburbs. He might then be in a freer position to negotiate with the Gemayel government.

5. Despite Walid Junblatt's objections, the security plan also offers advantages for the Druze. The proposed accord would help to defuse a troublesome situation in the lower Shuf by facilitating the withdrawal of the Christian Lebanese Forces (LF) without compromising Junblatt's control over the Shuf proper. Moreover, by negotiating with Gemayel over the security plan, the Druze can demonstrate their centrality to the process and place the responsibility for further concessions on political reforms directly on the government. Junblatt also succeeds in maintaining good relations with Syria and Israel, both of which generally support the principle of a security agreement.

6. For the LF, whose position in the Kharroub and Shuf has become untenable, the accord offers a reasonably honorable way out of a bad situation. The LF can now concentrate their military resources in the more important Maronite heartland and devote their political efforts toward blocking any political accord that tries to diminish Maronite influence. Moreover, divided and lacking funds, the LF probably calculates that for the moment it has more to gain from cooperating with the government than blocking a security accord which Israel, its primary patron, supports.

7. Syria's support for the proposed security plan serves its interests in a number of ways. In our view, Syria believes implementation of the security plan will lead to an orderly withdrawal of the MNF. Provision of this "window of opportunity" will, in the Syrian view, increase already mounting pressures from within the contributing countries for withdrawal of their contingents.

8. Syria seeks to demonstrate that it is a rational actor whose involvement in negotiations involving

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Lebanon is essential. The fact that Syria is willing to participate in a negotiation process that also involves Israel appears intended as a further signal to the United States that it is willing, in the proper context, to discuss issues involving Israeli security concerns in Lebanon.

9. It is also to Syria's advantage to permit Junblatt some freedom of action on local security-related issues which do not affect primary Syrian interests. Damascus is aware of Junblatt's unhappiness under too tight Syrian control. The security plan provides an opportunity for the Druze to be given a reminder that ties with Syria do not always bind. If Syria wished, Junblatt could be brought to swift agreement on the pact. By permitting him to make last-minute demands which delay implementation of the agreement, Syria further shows its willingness to tolerate—if not support—Junblatt's "independence."

Proposed Security Plan

A security plan for the Beirut suburbs and the Iqlim al-Kharroub area has been proposed, based on the following points:

- Withdrawal of Druze forces from the western Kharroub region; evacuation of the LF from the western Kharroub (between the Awwali and Damur Rivers); LAF control of the coastal highway to the Awwali River.
- Withdrawal of the LF from key positions in the Shahhar region (between Beirut's southern suburbs and the Damur River).
- Introduction of the ISF into the southern suburbs of Beirut; establishment of LAF checkpoints; withdrawal of armed militia-men from the streets.
- Declaration of Beirut International Airport as a "neutral zone."
- Replacement of LF with LAF forces at the Barbara checkpoint.

Implementing the Plan

10. At least portions of the security plan will probably go into effect. Full implementation of the plan, however, remains uncertain.

11. We believe that Syria supports eventual implementation of the plan, and it is not clear how long Damascus will continue to permit Junblatt's last-minute objections to delay matters. Syria may be willing to wait until after the US Congress reconvenes before pressing Junblatt into agreement. If Gemayel or Army Commander Tannous becomes convinced that full implementation of the security plan could lead to an early withdrawal of the MNF, they could take actions to frustrate full implementation of the plan.

12. Full implementation of the security plan would provide a substantial, but short-term, boost to the Gemayel government by extending its authority. It would also improve the political climate for discussion of national reconciliation issues. Gemayel's domestic political standing would undoubtedly benefit from successful implementation, and it could provide him an opportunity to work on political deals with the Shias and the Druze.

13. Although the security situation for the MNF may improve somewhat if the plan is put into effect, particularly in respect to artillery and mortar fire directed against it, the threat of terrorist actions will persist.

14. Nonetheless, implementation of the security accord should not be seen as evidence that the factions are willing to be any more flexible on their political demands or that they are less determined to protect their confessional and personal interests. The LF will continue to resist reforms that jeopardize Maronite preeminence and are still capable of undermining any security plan. Meanwhile the Druze, backed by Syria, will watch closely to ensure that Gemayel does not try to end-run the reconciliation process by buying off his rivals with cabinet posts. Junblatt will press for structural changes that go well beyond an expanded government of national unity. Even Nabih Barri, who is the most likely candidate to cut a separate deal with Gemayel, will not be able to work with the government until it is clear that the latter is prepared to meet basic Shia political demands and show more success in getting Israel out of southern Lebanon.

15. If Gemayel makes a genuine effort to deal with his Lebanese rivals and comes to some understanding with Syria, the security accords could pave the way for a government of national unity. We believe he is

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unlikely to make these efforts. Should he try to turn the national reconciliation process into merely a separate deal with Barri, while ignoring Junblatt, and "internalizing" the issue of a new government by cutting Syria out, the security plan will break down. The longer Gemayel temporizes on political reforms, the more vulnerable the plan will become to local security incidents and the mistrust and suspicion among various militias.

If the Plan Is Not Implemented

16. Failure to fully implement the current security plan would not automatically signal a return to widespread factional fighting. The Lebanese Forces militia is smarting from the military beating it took in the Shuf, and the Druze probably are more interested now in maintaining their positions there. A political impasse accompanied by low-level violence would prevail at least until spring.

17. If the plan is not implemented, Gemayel might try to break a stalemate by using the Army to extend government authority by force. A successful limited military offensive to control the entire Alayh ridgeline would strengthen government control in this area and could improve the government's bargaining position with both the Druze and the Shias. Gemayel may calculate that such a move would ensure that US forces at least would remain to guarantee the survival of his government. A successful assault would probably strengthen Christian resolve to resist fundamental reforms.

18. The ultimate means of breaking the impasse could come from Gemayel striking a deal with Syria. In this scenario the Lebanese Government would agree to become more responsive to Syrian interests in return for allowing Christian hegemony to continue. This solution would buy the Christian-dominated government considerable time and allow some sort of modus vivendi to emerge among Christian, Druze, and moderate Muslim communities.

Improved Army Capabilities

19. The Gemayel government's capability to expand its authority militarily—even in the absence of a political agreement—has steadily improved in recent months because the Army has grown in strength and is perceived locally as having succeeded in achieving its limited objectives to date. Recruitment continues at

high levels, and Tannous believes he is making progress toward his projected 10-brigade force. Although the heavy fighting last September caught the Army in the midst of its modernization effort, the units involved generally performed well and gained much-needed combat experience.

20. The Army emerged from the fighting last fall with its multiconfessional balance relatively intact, indicating that it could probably withstand similar tests in the future. The Army is capable of conducting limited operations to consolidate its control of the entire Alayh ridgeline without encountering serious confessional strains.

21. The Sabra-Shatilla operation in December served the Gemayel government's principal objective; the predominantly Palestinian camps were a politically acceptable target that would indirectly demonstrate the Army's capabilities to assert itself in West Beirut and possibly the southern suburbs. Shias in the southern suburbs probably viewed the operation as an indication of the Army's intentions toward them.

22. The successful sweep of the camps, however, did not accurately reflect the Army's ability to conduct a similar operation in the southern suburbs. Barri evidently was informed that the Army intended only to clear the camps of Palestinians and consequently ordered Shia militiamen not to fight. The confessional cohesion of Army units invading the camps was not tested because the troops reportedly confronted primarily Palestinians and other non-Lebanese.

23. The Army now probably could establish a symbolic presence and checkpoints along major arteries in south Beirut, but a sweep operation against the Shia neighborhoods could sorely test Army unity. Recent reinforcement of the southern suburbs with men and arms from Syrian-controlled areas and the widespread construction of defensive positions by the Shia militia could make such an operation considerably more costly in terms of casualties.

24. The long-term success of an Army effort to control the Alayh ridge would hinge on the extent of Syrian support to opposing Druze and Palestinian forces. An Army operation to complete its control of the ridgeline would sabotage the security agreement and further convince the opposition of the Gemayel government's duplicity. The Gemayel government,

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and Tannous in particular, expect that US military support will be available if required by the Army to stave off Syrian-backed opponents.

Syrian Attitudes

25. Syria's tactical shift away from military confrontation toward political means has not been accompanied by any major alterations in Syria's political objectives, however. The Rumsfeld-Assad meeting of 13 January indicates that there has been no weakening of basic Syrian goals in Lebanon. In fact, the Syrians appear to be hardening their positions on the 17 May accord and on a government of national unity. Syrian support for the Lebanese security plan and the release of the captured US airman serve Syria's interests both with respect to Lebanese and broader US-Syrian relations. These actions should not be viewed as indicating a weakening of Syrian resolve or retreat from the

previous Syrian position. Recent indications of Syrian involvement in organizing a "National Resistance Movement" in south Beirut suggest Damascus is holding open the confrontation option.

Arab Pressures on Syria

26. While Arab negotiators have been helpful both in conveying and refining the views of the various parties and putting forward suggestions of their own, Arab (particularly Saudi) "pressure" on Syria has been of little value in compelling Damascus to change its pursuit of strategic political goals in Lebanon. Fear of Syrian-inspired terrorism, sympathy for "Arab" goals in Lebanon, and simple unwillingness to complicate relations with Syria over issues not central to survival of their own regimes will continue to minimize Arab "influence" over Syria.

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